



The Psychology of Personal Constructs

George Kelly's revolutionary theory views people as scientists who actively interpret and predict their world through personal constructs—unique ways of seeing how things are alike yet different.

Meet Arlene

A Decision-Making Journey

Arlene, a 21-year-old engineering student, faces a critical moment when her 10-year-old car breaks down. She must balance school, full-time work, and now transportation—all while maintaining her independence.

Like a scientist approaching a problem, Arlene observes her environment, asks questions, anticipates answers, perceives relationships, hypothesizes solutions, and attempts to control outcomes.



Kelly's Revolutionary Approach

Not Just One Theory

Called cognitive, behavioral, existential, and phenomenological—yet it's none of these. It's a metatheory: a theory about theories.

Constructive Alternativism

All interpretations are subject to revision. Alternative constructions are always available—we're not victims of circumstances.

Personal Constructs

Meanings we place on events guide our behavior. These constructs are transparent patterns we create to cope with reality.

The Man Behind the Theory

Diverse Beginnings

Born April 28, 1905, on a Kansas farm. George Kelly's education was erratic—four high schools in four years, degrees in physics, mathematics, educational sociology, and labor relations.

Unexpected Path

From teaching soapbox oratory to labor organizers, to coaching drama, to aeronautical engineering—Kelly finally pursued psychology at age 26, completing his PhD at Iowa in 1931.



From Kansas to the World

1931-1945

Fort Hays State College: Developed traveling psychological clinics across Kansas during the Depression, evolving his therapeutic approach.

1955

Published The Psychology of Personal Constructs—his magnum opus containing his complete personality theory.

1

2

3

4

1946-1965

Ohio State University: Professor and clinic director, worked with Julian Rotter, formulated his theory.

1965-1967

Brandeis University: Colleague of Maslow. Died March 6, 1967, before completing theory revisions.



Person as Scientist

When you decide what to eat, what to watch, or what career to pursue, you're acting like a scientist. You ask questions, formulate hypotheses, test them, draw conclusions, and predict future events.

"Like all other people, your perception of reality is colored by your personal constructs—your way of looking at, explaining, and interpreting events in your world."

Scientist as Person



Scientific Observations

Every observation can be viewed from different perspectives. Every theory can be tilted and seen from new angles.



Half-Truths

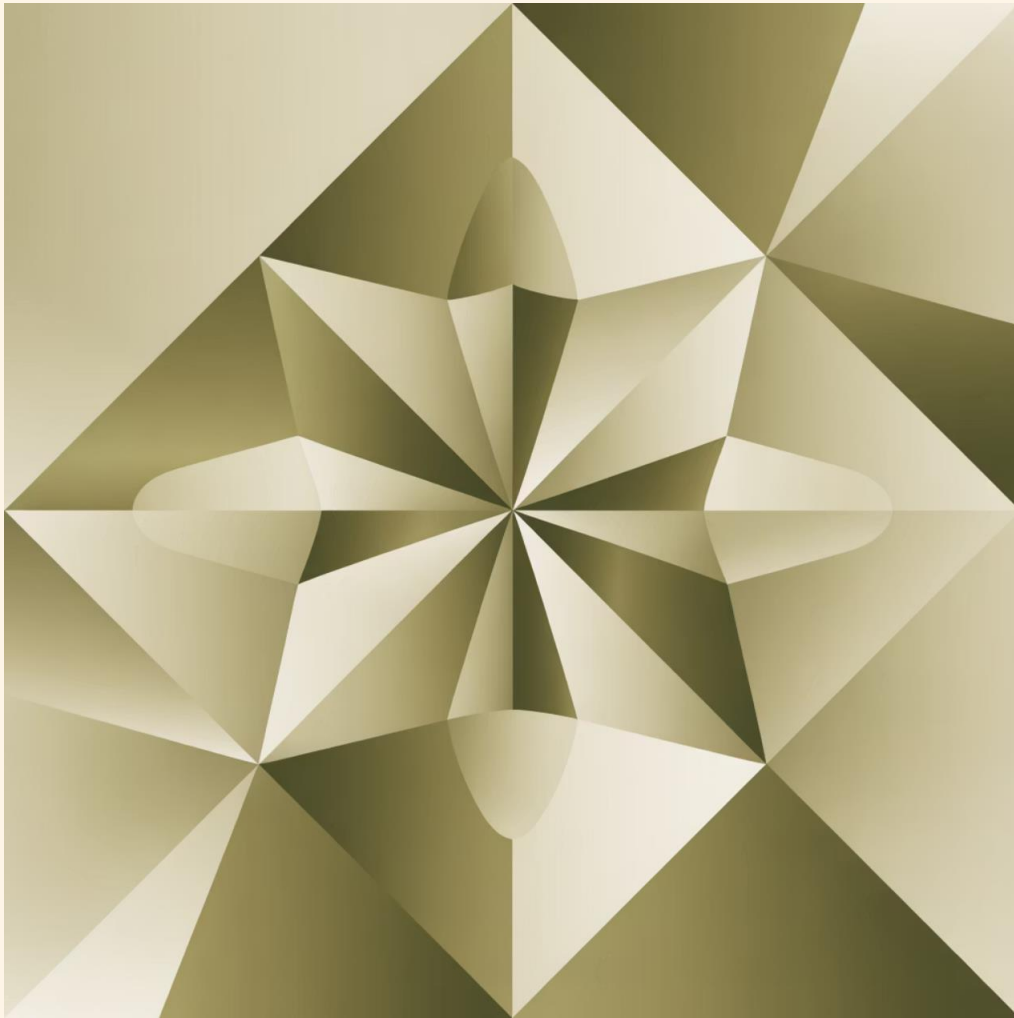
Kelly presented his theory as a set of half-truths, recognizing the inaccuracy of its constructions.



Open to Change

Kelly hoped his theory would be overthrown and replaced by a better one—encouraging its own evolution.

Constructive Alternativism



The universe really exists and functions as an integral unit, constantly changing. People strive to make sense of this ever-changing world.

"All of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement. The events we face today are subject to as great a variety of constructions as our wits will enable us to contrive."

Facts don't add up to truth—they can be looked at from different perspectives. Interpretation matters more than events themselves.



Understanding Personal Constructs

Transparent Templates

Personal constructs are patterns we create to cope with reality. They're ways of seeing how things are alike and different from other things.

Comparison and Contrast

A construct requires both: seeing how Ashly and Brenda are attractive while Carol is unattractive, or how Ashly and Brenda are irreligious while Carol is religious.

Shaping Behavior

Whether clearly perceived or dimly felt, personal constructs shape behavior. They're our means of predicting and controlling our environment.

The Basic Postulate

Anticipation

Kelly's fundamental assumption: "A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which that person anticipates events."

01

Person's Processes

A living, changing, moving human being—not drives, needs, or instincts. Life itself accounts for movement.

02

Channelized

People move with direction through flexible networks of pathways that facilitate and restrict action.

03

Anticipating Events

People guide actions by predictions of the future. Our present view of the future shapes our actions—not the past.



The Eleven Supporting Corollaries



Construction

We anticipate events by construing their replications—seeing similarities.



Individuality

People differ in their construction of events based on different experiences.



Organization

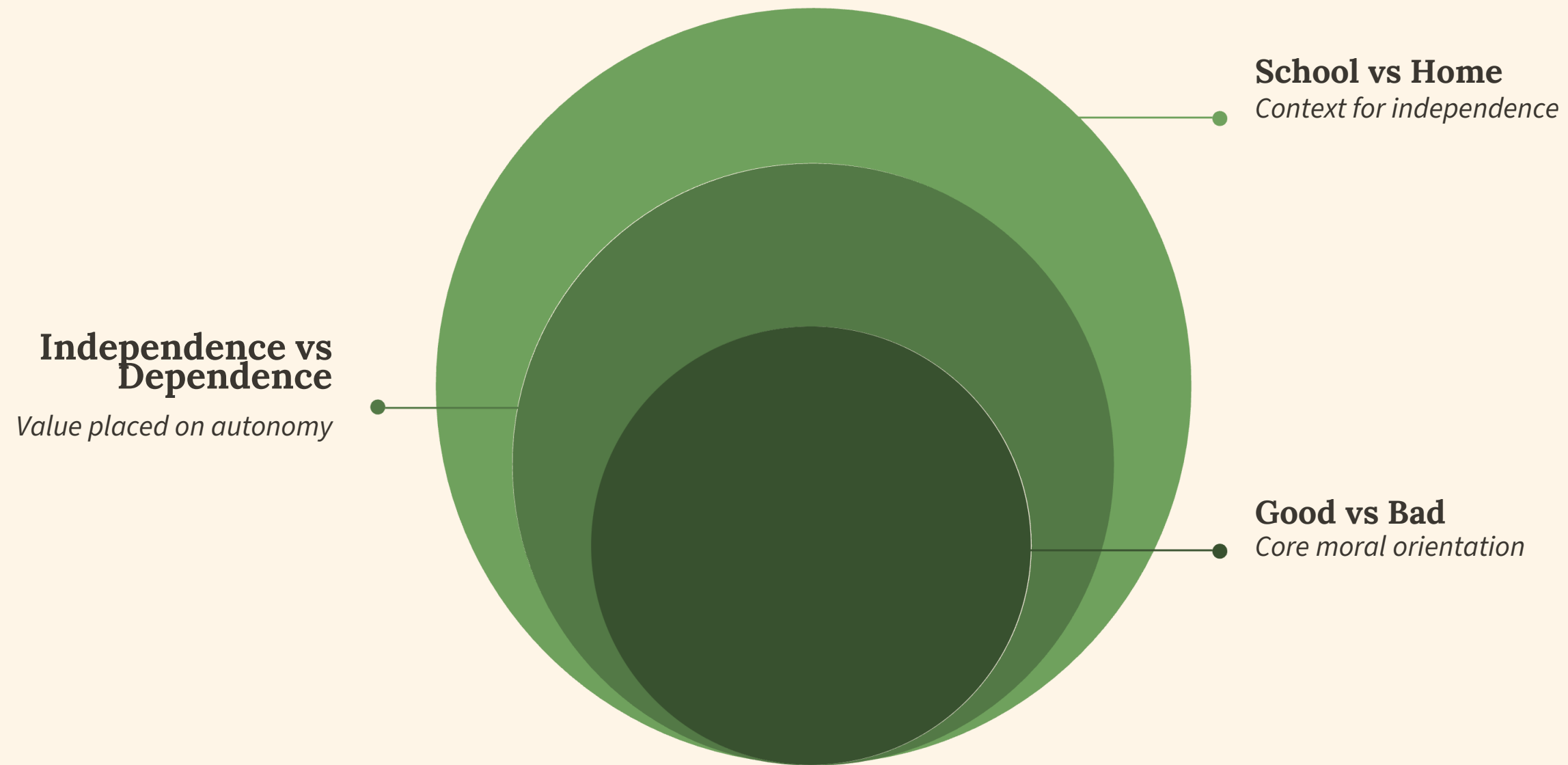
We arrange constructs in ordinal relationships to minimize inconsistencies.



Dichotomy

Construction systems are composed of dichotomous constructs—either-or propositions.

Arlene's Construct Hierarchy



Arlene's decision-making reveals complex ordinal relationships. She construed independence as good, staying in school as independence, and buying a used car as the best transportation option—each choice nested within larger constructs.

Choice and Range

Choice Corollary

People choose alternatives through which they anticipate greater possibility for extending future constructs. Arlene chose independence over dependence, buying over repairing—each broadening her future range of choices.



Range Corollary

Personal constructs are finite and relevant only to a specific range of convenience. Arlene's independence/dependence construct was relevant to her car decision but excluded irrelevancies like up/down or light/dark.



Experience and Adaptation



Experience Corollary

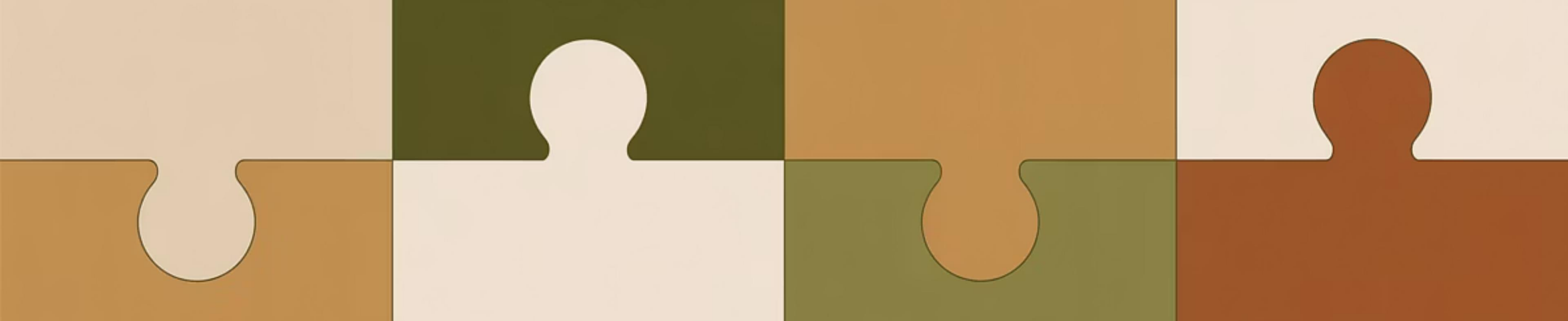
Construction systems vary as we successively construe replications of events. Experience is the meaning we attach to events, not the events themselves.

Modulation Corollary

Variation is limited by the permeability of existing constructs. Permeable constructs admit new elements; impermeable ones don't.

Arlene's Growth

When Arlene's car broke down, she restructured her notion of independence from "freedom from interference" to include "responsibility and anxiety."



Consistency and Incompatibility

The fragmentation corollary allows for incompatibility: "A person may successively employ a variety of constructive subsystems which are inferentially incompatible with each other."

❏ **Example:** *A man might protect his wife yet encourage her independence. Protection and independence seem incompatible, but both are subsumed under the larger construct of love. Underlying stability exists despite surface inconsistencies.*

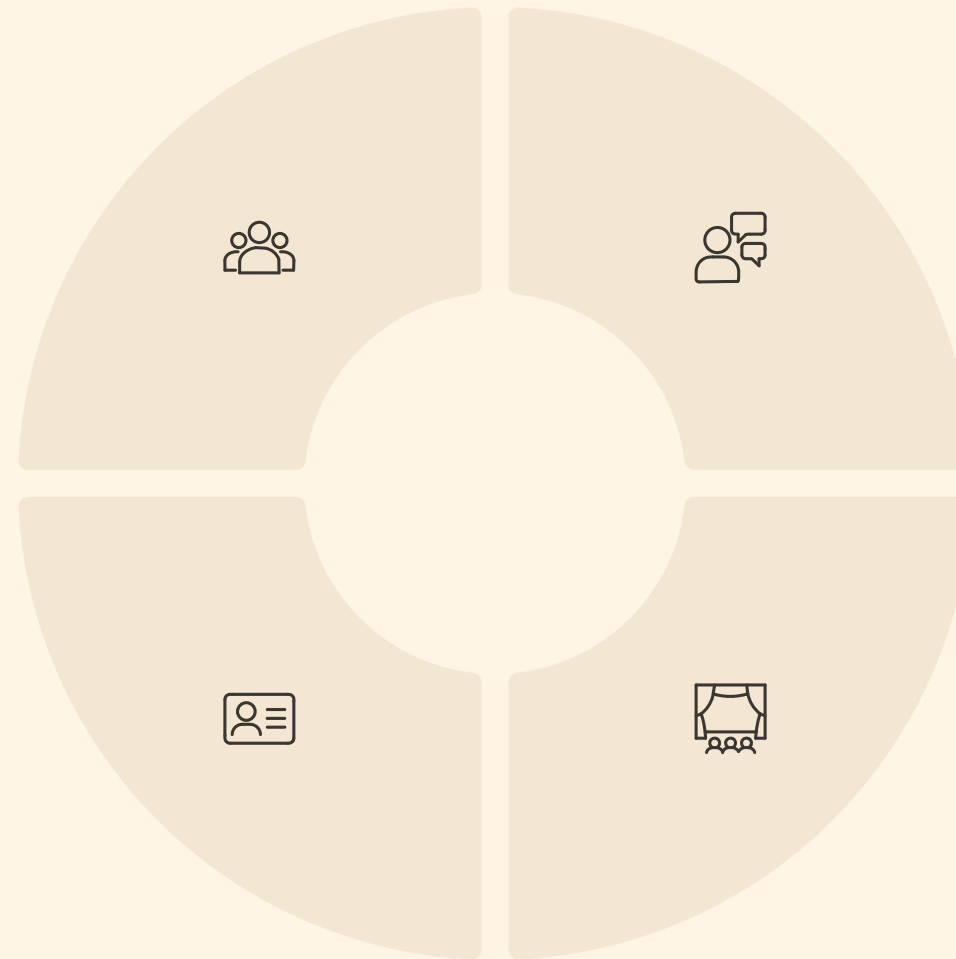
Similarities and Social Processes

Commonality

People with similar constructions have psychologically similar processes—even with different experiences.

Core Role

Defines who we really are, gives us identity, and provides guidelines for living.



Sociality

To play a role in social processes, we must accurately construe others' belief systems.

Role

A pattern of behavior resulting from understanding others' constructs. Roles are psychological, not sociological.

Communication and Understanding



People belong to the same cultural group because they construe their experience in the same way—not merely because they behave alike or expect the same things.

In interpersonal relations, we don't just observe behavior; we interpret what that behavior means to the other person. When Arlene negotiated with the car dealer, she was aware of his words, actions, and their meanings to him.

We realize we're part of the other person's construction system, creating complex layers of mutual understanding.

Arlene's Roles



Peripheral Roles

Student, employee, daughter, girlfriend, potential buyer—roles based on understanding others' expectations in specific contexts.



Core Role

Her identity as an independent, responsible adult pursuing engineering—defining who she really is and guiding everyday decisions.

Key Principles of Personal Construct Theory

1

Active Construction

People actively construe their world like scientists—observing, hypothesizing, testing, and concluding.

2

Alternative Views

All interpretations are subject to revision. We're not victims of circumstances—alternatives always exist.

3

Anticipation

Behavior is guided by how we anticipate the future, not by the past or present circumstances.

4

Dichotomous Constructs

We see things in terms of similarities and contrasts—how things are alike and different.

5

Individual Differences

No two people construe events exactly the same way, even with similar experiences.

6

Social Understanding

Communication requires construing others' constructions—understanding their belief systems.



The Legacy of Personal Construct Theory

Kelly's theory offers a unique perspective: we are the architects of our own reality. Through imagination and foresight, we can find better ways of restructuring our lives.

"The events we face today are subject to as great a variety of constructions as our wits will enable us to contrive."

Like Arlene choosing her path forward, we all face decisions. Kelly reminds us that we're not passive observers but active participants in creating meaning, anticipating futures, and choosing alternatives that extend our possibilities.

Applications of Personal Construct Theory

*Kelly developed his theoretical formulations from over 20 years of therapeutic practice before publishing *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* in 1955. His work spans abnormal development, psychotherapy approaches, and the innovative Role Construct Repertory Test.*



Abnormal Development

Healthy Individuals

Validate personal constructs against real-world experiences, like competent scientists testing reasonable hypotheses and adjusting theories based on data.

Unhealthy Individuals

Stubbornly cling to outdated constructs, fearing validation of new ones. Like incompetent scientists who reject legitimate results and refuse to amend theories.

Kelly defined a disorder as "any personal construction which is used repeatedly in spite of consistent invalidation."

Construction Systems and Permeability

Too Impermeable

New experiences don't penetrate the construction system. Example: An abused child construes intimacy as bad and solitude as good, rigidly denying the value of any intimate relationship.

Too Flexible

Leads to disorganization, inconsistent behavior patterns, and transient values. Individual is too easily "shaken by the impact of unexpected minor daily events."



Four Elements of Human Disturbance

01

Threat

Awareness of imminent comprehensive change in core structures

02

Fear

More specific and incidental than threat

03

Anxiety

Recognition that events lie outside the range of convenience

04

Guilt

Sense of having lost one's core role structure

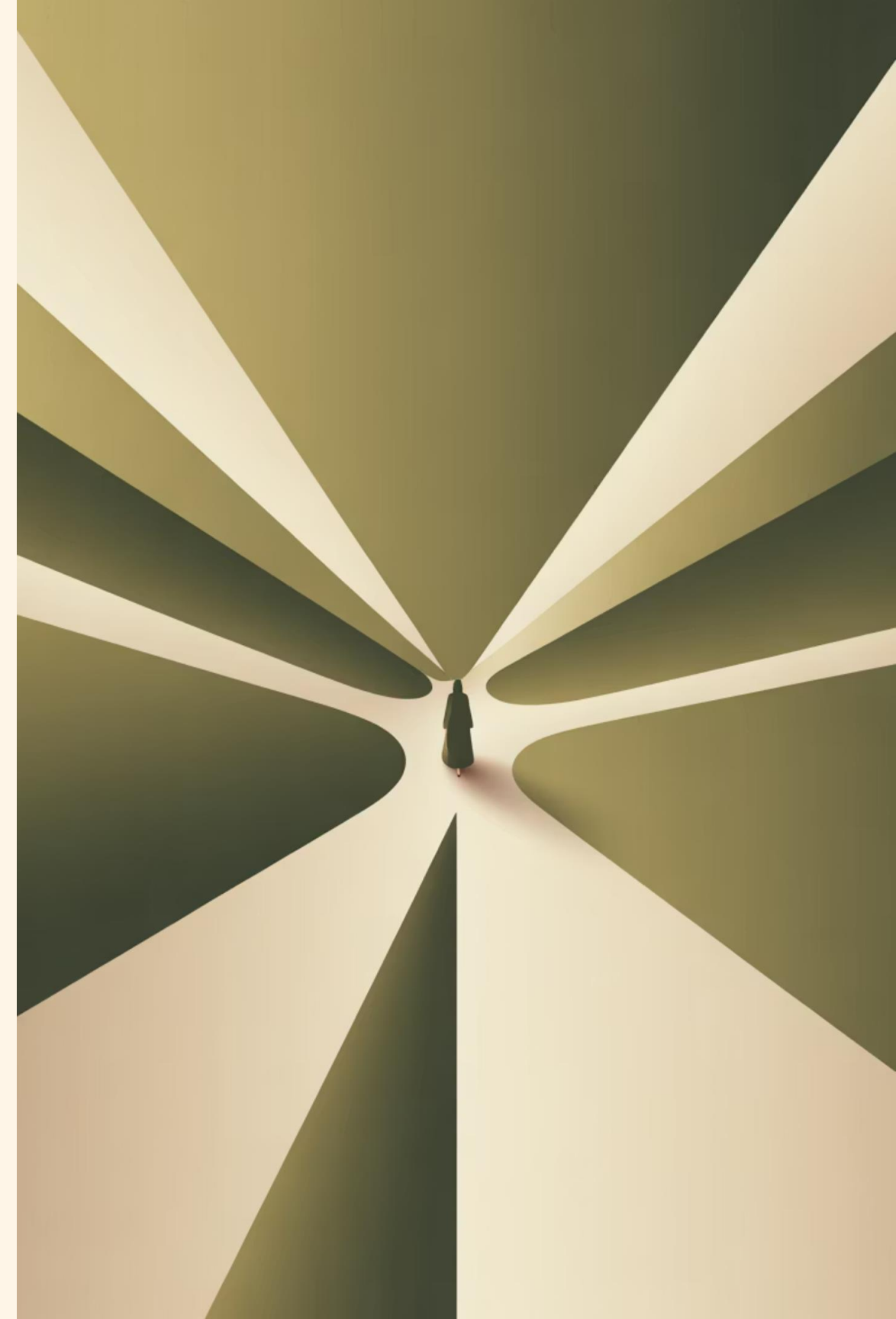
Understanding Threat and Fear

Threat Example

A man driving dangerously realizes he may run over a child or be arrested for reckless driving. This threatens a comprehensive portion of his personal constructs.

Fear Example

If suddenly confronted with the probability of crashing his car, he experiences fear. Threat demands comprehensive restructuring—fear, an incidental one.



Anxiety and Guilt

Anxiety

Occurs when experiencing new events outside one's range of convenience. Example: Arlene negotiating with a used-car dealer felt normal anxiety.

Pathological anxiety exists when incompatible constructs can no longer be tolerated and the construction system breaks down.

Guilt

People feel guilty when they behave inconsistently with their sense of who they are.

Those who never developed a core role don't feel guilty—they may be anxious or confused, but without personal identity, they don't experience guilt.



Psychotherapy Approach

Psychological distress exists when people have difficulty validating personal constructs, anticipating future events, and controlling their present environment.

1

Client Choice

Clients, not therapists, select the goal

2

Active Participation

Clients are active participants in the therapeutic process

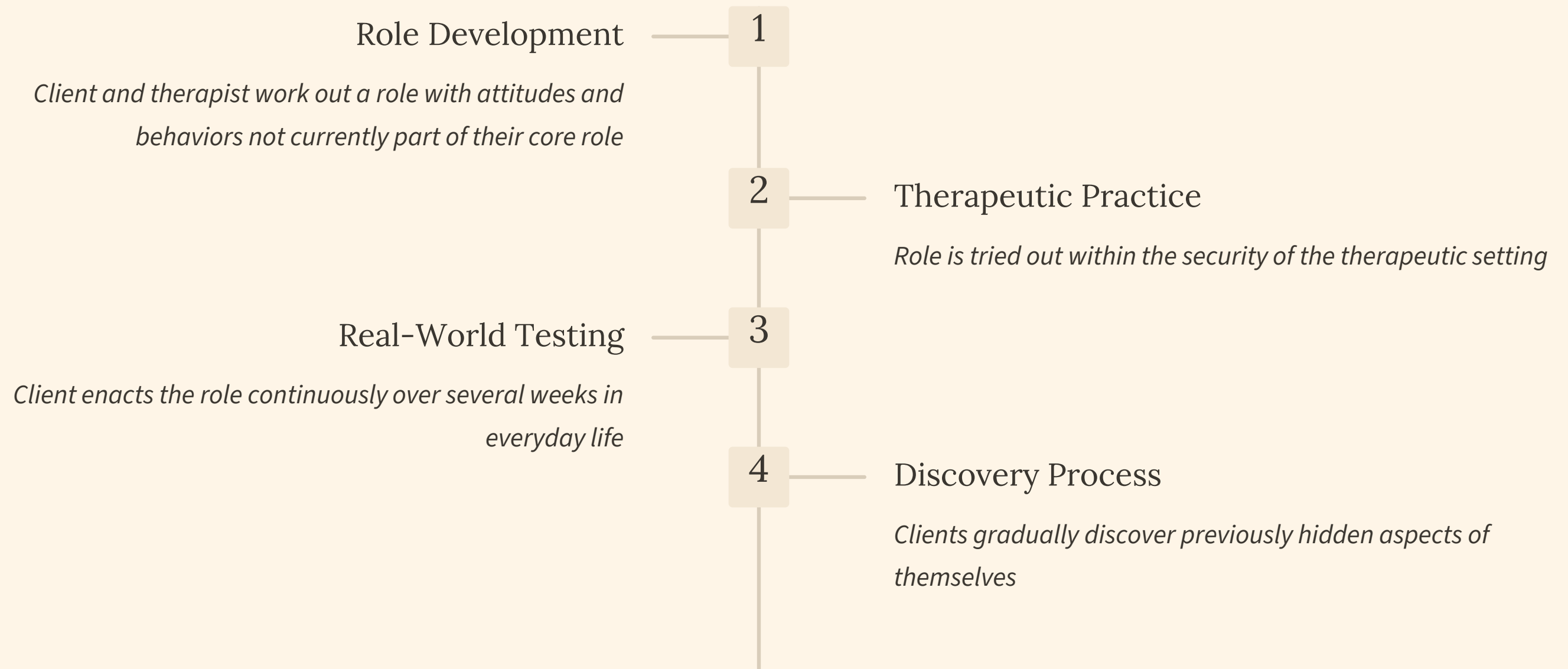
3

Therapist Role

Assist clients to alter construct systems to improve prediction efficiency

Fixed-Role Therapy

A technique to help clients change their outlook on life by acting out a predetermined role.





The Preposterous Interpretations Discovery

Kelly stumbled on an unusual procedure that strongly resembles fixed-role therapy. After becoming uncomfortable with Freudian techniques, he offered clients "preposterous interpretations" for their complaints.

Most clients accepted these far-fetched explanations and used them as guides to future action. Many began to function better! The key: clients must interpret their lives from a different perspective and see themselves in a different role.

The Role Construct Repertory Test

The Rep Test discovers ways people construe significant people in their lives.



Role Title List

Person designates people who fit role titles (e.g., "a teacher you liked")



Construct Development

Choose three people; identify how two are alike and differ from the third



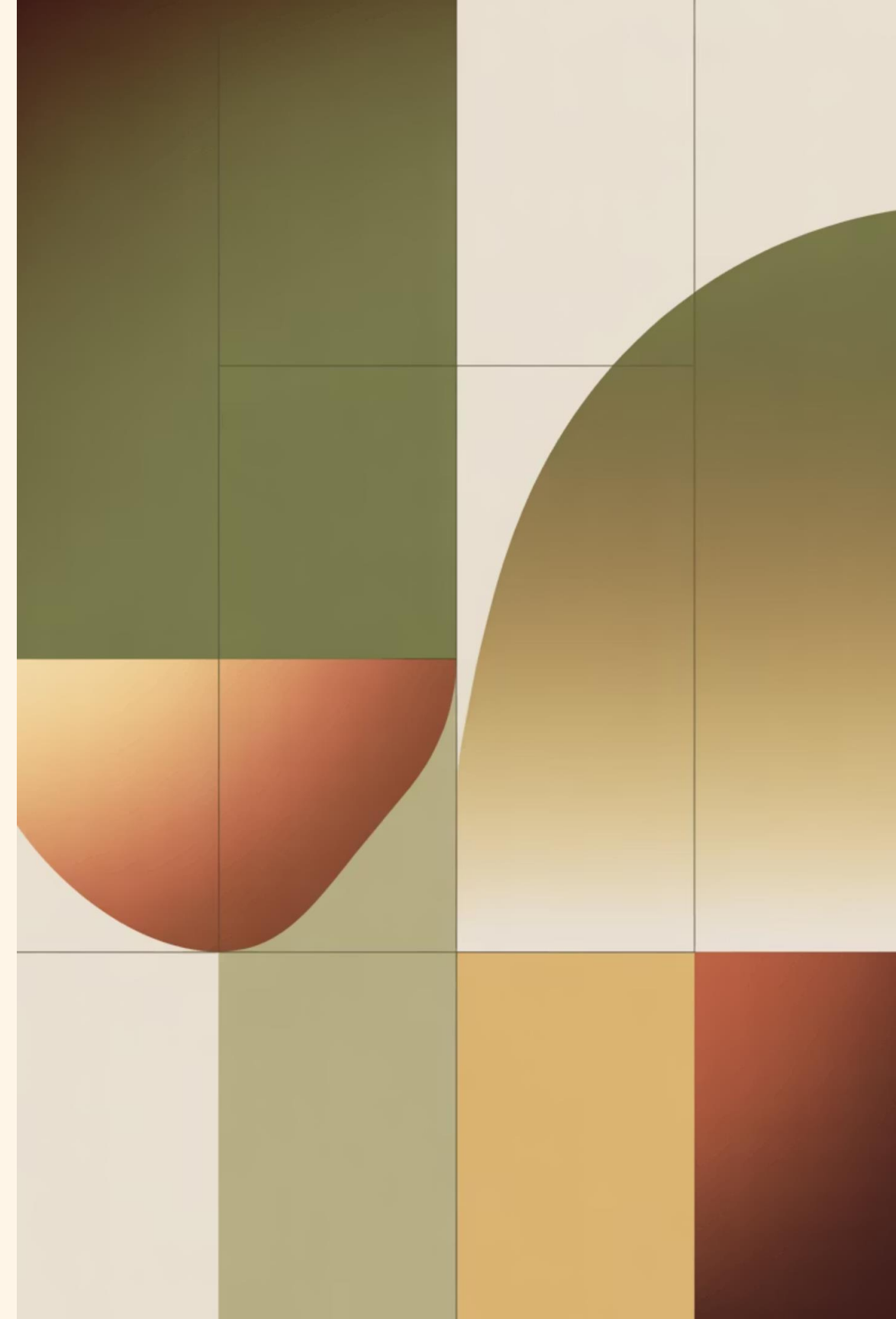
Rating Grid

Rate every role/person on every construct to reveal patterns

Rep Test Example

A woman can see how her father and boss are alike or different, whether she identifies with her mother, how her boyfriend and father are alike, or how she construes men in general.

The test can be given early in therapy and again at the end. Changes in personal constructs reveal the nature and degree of movement made during therapy.



Research Impact

600+

Empirical Studies

*Nearly 600 studies on the repertory test
alone*

1

Seminal Work

*One major publication generated
remarkable impact*

20+

Years of Practice

*Over 20 years of therapeutic practice
before publication*

Kelly's emphasis on cognitive sets like schemas was instrumental in forming the field of social cognition, one of the most influential perspectives in social and personality psychology today.

Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Murphy, Burns, and Kilby (2017) used Kelly's methodologies to explore how teens with ASD construe close relationships on their own terms.



Core Trust Construct

Participants viewed relationships with friends and family in terms of trust, which played a role in how comfortable they felt about perceived similarity or difference from others.



Humor Construct

Most participants revealed a core "humor" construct in developing and maintaining friendships, showing they understood humor's importance in relating with peers.



Relationships as Support

Participants identified relationships as sources of support, valued qualities in self and others, and discussed development and maintenance of relationships.



Internalized Homophobia Research

Moradi and colleagues (2009) applied Kelly's concepts of threat and guilt to understand internalized prejudice in gay and lesbian individuals.

Threat

May lead gays and lesbians to separate their homosexual identity from their self to avoid frightening change in self-construal.

Associated with lower preference for gay or lesbian sexual orientation.

Guilt

Occurs when individuals perceive core aspects within themselves are incongruent with how they ought to be.

High guilt was associated with more denigrating of gay and lesbian identity.

Therapeutic Interventions for Internalized Prejudice



Draw Out Contrasts

Ask clients to imagine what kind of person would not be anxious about being gay, enabling a shift to acceptable self-construal.



Guilt Reduction

Focus on replacing negative self-construals with more positive ones.



Threat Reduction

Enable clients to see that integrating being homosexual into desired self-construal might not mean fundamental change.

Feminist Identification Study

Moradi, Martin, and Brewster (2012) used personal construct theory's notion of threat to predict who identifies as feminist.

The Puzzle

Many people agree with feminist values but don't identify as feminists—the "I'm not a feminist but" phenomenon.

The Finding

Greater discrepancy between actual-self, ideal-self, and feminist-self resulted in lower feminist identification.

The Intervention

Interaction with diverse self-identified feminists reduced threat and increased feminist identification.



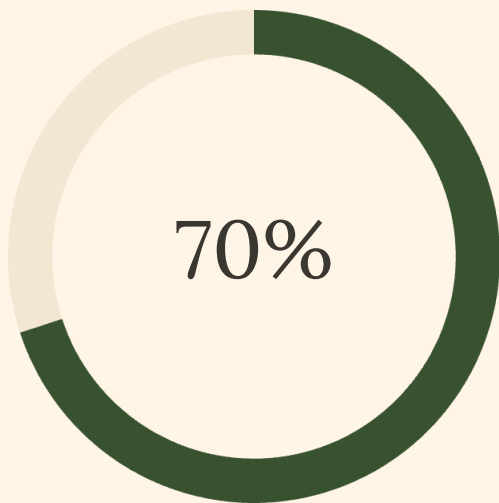
Personal Constructs and the Big Five

Grice and colleagues compared Kelly's personal construct theory with the Big Five traits model.



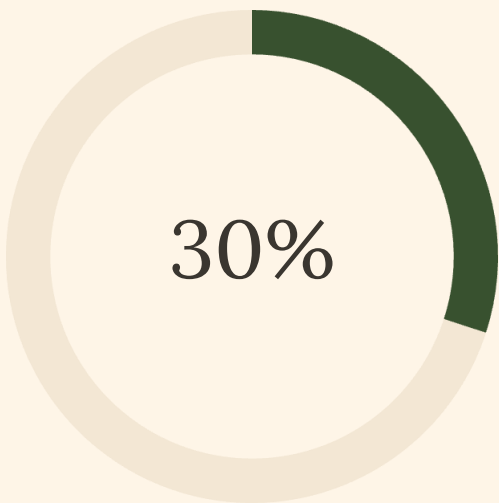
Only 50% overlap between repertory grid ratings and Big Five scores. The repertory grid captured unique aspects like body type, ethnicity, wealth, smoker status, and political affiliation not measured by the Big Five.

Critique: Theory Evaluation



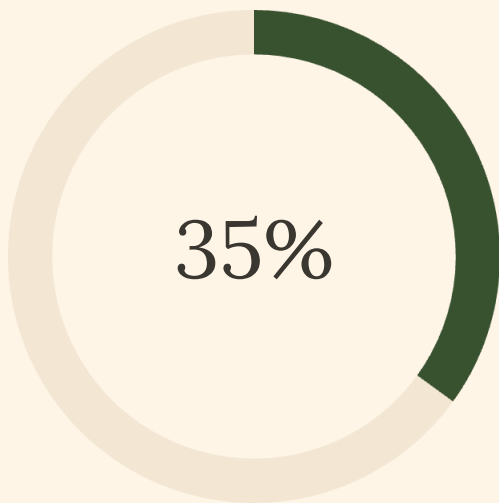
Research Generation

Moderate to strong rating on research generated



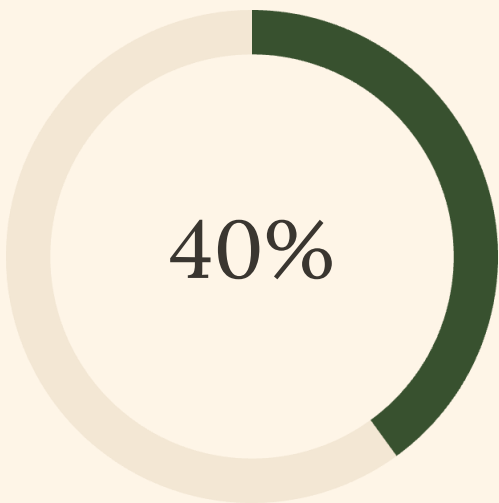
Falsifiability

Low rating—theory doesn't lend itself easily to verification or falsification



Organizing Knowledge

Low rating—avoidance of motivation, development, and cultural forces limits ability



Guide to Action

Low rating—offers few specific suggestions despite innovative therapy techniques

Critique: Consistency and Parsimony

Internal Consistency

Rates very high. Kelly was exceptionally careful in choosing terms and concepts. The 1,200+ page work is pieced together like a finely woven fabric.

However, Kelly did not define terms operationally, though he wrote comprehensive and exacting definitions.

Parsimony

Exceptionally straightforward and economical despite the length of Kelly's two-volume book.

The basic theory is stated in one fundamental postulate and elaborated by 11 corollaries. All other concepts relate easily to this simple structure.

Concept of Humanity

Optimistic View

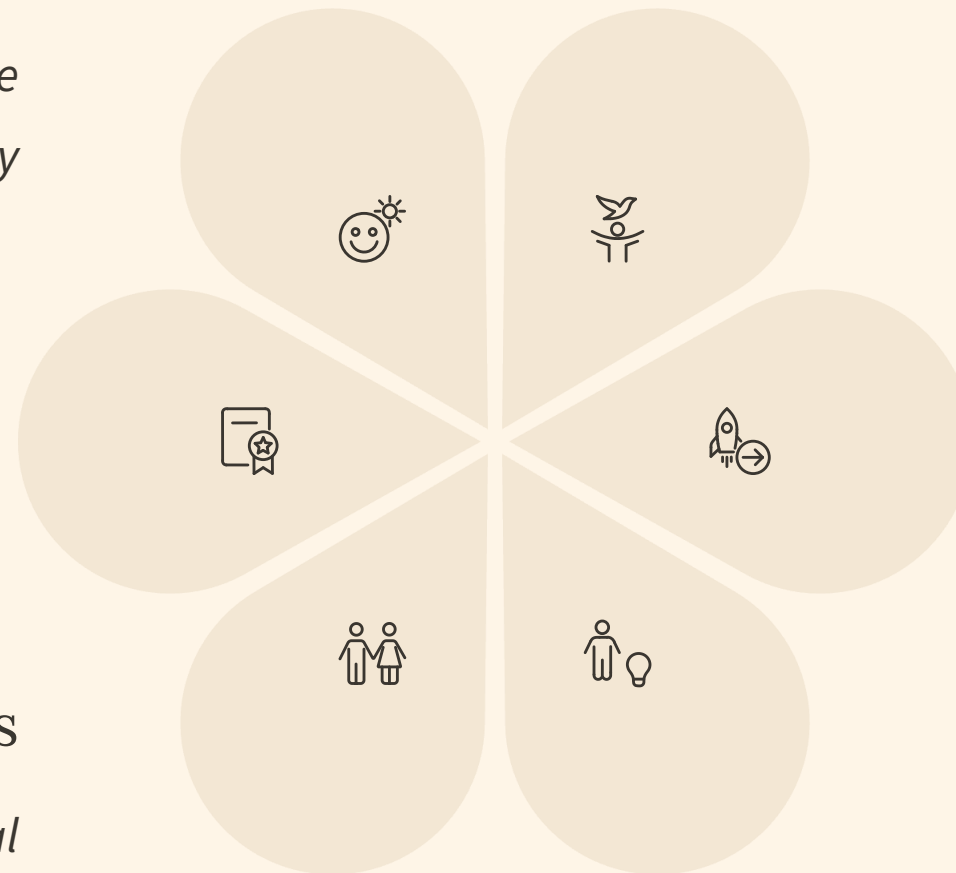
People anticipate the future and live accordingly

Uniqueness

Emphasized uniqueness of personality and individual interpretations

Social Influences

Inclined more toward social than biological influences



Free Choice

Within personal construct systems, people are free to make choices

Teleological

Personality guided by present anticipation of future events

Conscious Processes

Emphasized conscious over unconscious processes